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ABSTRACT

The tasks of elementary principals are characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. As proof of this, studies have indicated that principals may perform as many as 50 separate tasks in an hour. Principals also must interact with a wide range of individuals, must accomplish tasks requiring many different skills, and are required to make a number of different affective and cognitive responses. All these activities are regularly interrupted by other tasks, problems, or crises. The combination of task brevity, variety, and fragmentation makes it extremely difficult for principals to make sense of their work. These three properties make the job hectic, complex, and hard to learn experientially. An understanding of these properties should guide those who select and train principals. Further research into the work of principals and the development of a framework for analysis may provide the foundation necessary for designing more effective selection and training procedures. (Author/JM)

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Making Sense of Principals' Work

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Making sense of what principals do is not an easy task. There are many frameworks for examining the principalship. Several descriptions of the elementary school principal focus on the role expectations of the principal. Others describe broad job functions of the principal. Both of these are useful approaches, useful for understanding the broader aspects of the principal's job. But they miss some central and crucial features of the actual work of principals. These approaches do not describe certain basic properties of the work such as the brevity, variety, and fragmentation of tasks. These are central to understanding what principals do.

The basic properties of the work have important consequences for the selection and the training of principals. Without a systematic understanding of the nature of principals' tasks, selection becomes problematic and training may remain unfocused. Let us look at three central features of the work of principals and examine the ways they influence how principals go about their daily work.

Brevity

The work of elementary school principals, like the work of other managers (Mintzberg, 1977), consists of many tasks of short duration. Throughout the day a school principal moves from one short activity to another short activity. These activities may involve such diverse things as quick telephone calls to parents, short conversations with teachers about students, a light perusal of the daily mail, a short observational tour of the lunchroom, staccato contacts with individual pupils, or spot announcements on the intercom. The work of principals is characterized by brevity.

An observational study of two principals in a large urban district (Peterson, 1978) describes the brevity of principals' work. Most of the activities of these principals lasted from one to two minutes. The two principals

spent 85 percent of their time in tasks lasting less than nine minutes. Moving from one short interaction to another, they have upwards of 50 activities in a single hour. Research on other types of managers suggests that this is a common property of the managerial role (Mintzberg, 1977; Stewart, 1967; Walker and Guest, 1956).

These two principals occasionally worked on tasks for longer than a minute or two. The longer activities, often involving the mediation of disputes, lasted less than an hour and usually less than half an hour. The principals did not spend their longer attentions on such tasks as planning, innovating, or restructuring programs.

The work of principals consists of short tasks and the day is filled with sometimes several hundred separate activities. But why is this the case in the work or principals?

Neither empirical research nor theoretical formulations describing the work of principals provides clear reasons for this welter of activity. But we find some clues in the research on other types of managers and in studies of organizational processes.

The demands on the principal may influence the brevity of tasks. Thompson (1967) suggests that administrators must keep the organization at the nexus of several streams of institutionalized action. The administrator must insure the "co-alignment of technology and the task environment with a viable domain, and of organization design and structure appropriate to that domain." (p. 147) The administrator spans and links levels, facilitating the coordination between levels and components and between the organization and the task environment. In elementary schools, unlike some organizations, there is only one administrator present. As a single building administrator, the principal must act as the primary linking mechanism for the entire subunit. The principal links the

internal components to each other, links the school level unit to the outside environment, and links it to upper level units in the organization. In this capacity the principal is constantly linking - often through brief encounters - component to component, school unit to district unit, and the school to the environment. This increases the number and type of contact activities of principals and shortens the length of each contact. No doubt there are other reasons in addition to this one.

Whatever the reasons for the brevity of the tasks of principals, this feature makes the work of principals difficult. Brief activities take more energy than longer activities. This is because assessing the situation, gathering information, and making decisions about what to do, all take place quickly, almost instantaneously in short tasks. In addition, when a day is filled with many short tasks, it is harder to remember what decisions have been made and which information must be processed or stored.

It is hard to make sense of the day, let alone make sense of the week. In this type of work pattern, one is able to assess the quantity of tasks completed, but it is difficult, to say the least, to assess the quality of work done. This is particularly problematic when the day is filled with upwards of 200 tasks.

In selecting and training elementary school principals, one might do well to select principals who are able to deal with a job filled with brief encounters. And, where possible, one could design training programs to prepare principals for rapid movement from one activity to another.

Variety

Variety is also a characteristic property of the work of elementary principals and other managers who are relatively close to the technical core (Mintzberg, 1977; Stewart, 1967; Wolcott, 1973). Elementary principals do an

enormous variety of tasks during a day's work. They supervise and evaluate the quality of instruction in classrooms, talk with textbook salesmen, explain to distraught parents that their child has a learning disability, listen to a teacher whose husband is seriously ill, evaluate building maintenance and custodial work, listen to a child who is sharing her proudest work, and deal with central office administrators regarding busing or discipline policy. Variety characterizes the work of elementary principals.

The tasks of principals may vary in a number of different ways. At the present time there is no inventory of these tasks. We have no systematic study of principals which documents adequately the variety of tasks principals face in their work. Lortie's study of principals at the Finance and Productivity Center of the University of Chicago, and those of Peterson (1978), Mintzberg (1977), and Sayles (1964) provide some suggestive ways of categorizing the variety of tasks faced by principals. There seem to be several central ways that the work of these administrators varies.

The type of person a principal interacts with is one important source of variation in their work. Unlike many managerial positions, the elementary principal works with several age cohorts: youngsters, young adults, and middle-aged adults. Problems of choosing appropriate language, deference, and affectivity for different age groups are not minor concerns for the elementary principal. Principals also interact with individuals having varied specialized training, from different status levels, or different organizational roles.

Principals face a broad range of tasks requiring various skills or capacities which may use different technologies. Bookkeeping, personnel management, budgetting, planning and public relations are all part of the work of principals. Similar technical variety is faced by managers of small shops or businesses.

Another way in which the principal's tasks vary is that of affectivity.

Many of the tasks of principals require interpersonal relationships. These relationships inherently produce affective responses with which the principal must deal. The affective content of interactions varies enoumously. One finds anger, joy, sadness, and anxiety in schools. The tasks of principals at one time or another may cover every possible emotion. Though affective variation may be characteristic of many managerial positions, there may be a higher incidence of affectively laden tasks and greater emotional intensity in schools than in other organizations.

The cognitive processes involved in tasks also vary. Short-term memory, problem solving, and higher level cognitive processes are required in varying amounts to complete different administrative tasks. Principals need a wide repertoire of cognitive skills.

Presently, we do not know how much the cognitive demands of the principal's tasks vary. One would presume they may vary more for school principals than for, say, architects or accountants. This is in part due to the technology of school management which is less specialized than that of architecture or accounting. Due to this, principals' tasks have a broad band of cognitive variability, while architects and accountants have a narrow band of variability. The greater the variability, the more skills one needs to accomplish a set of tasks.

In sum, variety in tasks produces problems for practicing principals. They must interact with a wide range of individuals, accomplish tasks involving a number of different skills, participate in incidents with enormous affective diversity, and work on many activities with differing cognitive demands. Task variety is more complex if the pattern of variety is less predictable. This seems to be the case in the work of principals.

When task variety is not predictable, learning from experience is difficult.

The principal may not face a particular combination of task characteristics more than a few times. Developing a repertoire of skills is difficult in this situation. March (1978) suggests this as one of the problems faced in learning from experience.

Models of managerial activities may assist principals in making sense of task variability. Such models might help principals learn from even the most unique combination of tasks. D.J. Mathew's (1975) task analysis framework is a potentially useful model of task variability. A principal who understands Mathew's framework might be able to analyze the nature of the tasks faced on the job and develop routines to deal with broad classes of tasks. These routines could replace the need to cope with each task as though it were new or unique.

The selection and training of principals might usefully take into consideration the demands caused by the variety of tasks principals face.

Fragmentation

The work of elementary school principals is fragmented. That is to say the activities of principals are regularly interrupted by other tasks, problems, or crises. Seldom does the principal engage in one activity for more than a few minutes before another task interrupts the work. For instance, we could imagine a scenario such as this one:

> A principal returns to the office after greeting the pupils at the door and begins writing the weekly parent newsletter. Five minutes into the work, the secretary calls to say that Mrs. Jurgens is on the telephone to complain about the third grade science workbook. While on the telephone, the nurse rushes in to ask the principal what to do about a child who has a deep cut in his forehead -- should she send him to the hospital of call the parent who is a doctor? These questions are answered and the principal returns to the newsletter but must leave after five minutes to attend the administrative

council meeting at the central office. The newsletter remains unfinished.

One activity is not completed before another task requiring immediate attention interrupts the workflow.

The pattern of this scenario is not uncommon. School administrators, factory foremen, and store managers are plagued by fragmented work schedules. Research on this phenomenon (Martin, 1980 ; Mintzberg, 1977; Stewart, 1967; Walker and Guest, 1956; and the research being completed at the University of Illinois, Chicago Circle) support this description. These studies show that managers in different organizational settings face constant and unpredictable interruptions in their work.

Though we know the work of managers is characterized by fragmentation, we have little empirical data on the source of these interruptions, the pattern of occurrence, or the impact of fragmentation on the effectiveness of principals.

The source of work fragmentation perhaps lies in the nature and complexity of the role and in the locus of task initiation. Mintzberg (1977) and Sayles (1964) contend that the manager, as an interstitial position, involves coping with problems of workflow, information transmission, and decision-making simultaneously. These problems cause task interruption. The greater the number of simultaneous problems the greater is the work fragmentation (Mintzberg, 1977, p. 209). In addition, when the locus of task initiation is outside the manager's control, there is a greater chance of task discontinuity and fragmentation of work.

School principals have complex roles and a high proportion of tasks initiated by others. The work of principals is complex due to the variety of tasks and the diverse roles inherent in the work (Lipham and Hoeh, 1974;

March, 1978). In one study (Peterson, 1978) over 40% of the time of principals was initiated by others. Because of this, the work of principals is prone to discontinuous and interrupted activities.

Whatever the reasons for fragmentation in the work of principals, this characteristic produces problems for these administrators. First, it is difficult to carve out the longer periods of time needed for reflection, planning, and other time-intensive work. Second, it is difficult to assess the efficiency of one's time use when activities are broken into small pieces and dispersed throughout the day or across weeks. Third, it is difficult to make sense of one's work, to gain an understanding of the job when so many tasks are fragmented.

Presently, we do not have a picture of the pattern of interruptions in the work of principals. It might be that different parts of the day or year have a higher percentage of interruptions; that certain types of communities are more assertive and demand more of the principal's time and attention; or that different types of student or faculty characteristics are associated with more crises and thus greater fragmentation. If we knew the patterns of work fragmentation, we might prepare principals to deal with the specific types of fragmentation they will encounter.

Fragmentation is a property of the work of principals. To be a competent principal, one must be able to cope with task fragmentation. In selecting and training principals this property might be taken into consideration and appropriate exercises developed. In addition, individuals who cannot function under fragmented work patterns or who cannot learn to cope with this pattern of work might be encouraged to seek other positions.

Brevity, Variety, Fragmentation Combined

Occupations have different degrees and combinations of task brevity, variety, and fragmentation. For example, a fast food salesperson may have extremely brief interactions, but little task variety. A project manager for a large construction firm may have highly varied tasks, but ones which involve several hours of uninterrupted work. An executive secretary may have a fragmented schedule with many interruptions and truncated activities, but have little task variety.

In contrast to these examples, the work of principals combines all three properties: brevity, variety, and fragmentation. The combination of these properties makes the job difficult, stressful, and hard to learn. When tasks vary greatly and activities are discontinuous, it is difficult to develop a clear picture of the work, to see the patterns of activity, and to develop a framework for understanding the whole job. A principal can easily become overwhelmed by the parts of tasks which he or she cannot make sense of, and may thus find it difficult to determine their particular contribution to school functioning.

We can better understand the problems produced by the combination of brevity, variety, and fragmentation by starting with one of these properties and examining hypothetically the increased complication as the other two are added to the job.

Let us begin with a job that has many brief tasks. An assembly line worker has such a job. His job requires repeating many brief and similar tasks. If we add variety to the work, we have a more difficult job. The worker must both work quickly and change activities. With task brevity plus variety, the job is significantly more demanding.

Now, when we combine brevity and variety with fragmentation, the

difficulties of the job increase geometrically. When tasks are brief, highly varied, and frequently interrupted, the individual must work quickly and use a wide repertoire of routines or programs. At the same time, the person must be able to stop an activity in the middle and complete it later. The person in this situation must be able to work quickly, change gears easily, and finish tasks in bits and pieces throughout the day.

The addition of each new task characteristic increases the difficulty of the work of principals. The combination of task brevity, variety, and fragmentation makes it extremely problematic for principals to make sense of their work.

In order to be effective, school level managers must deal with a worklife filled with a myriad of brief, varied, and fragmented activities. They must have the energy to keep going and the ability to learn from experience. They must make sense of the puzzle pieces so that they can improve their daily work.

James March (1978) raises some important problems of principals learning from on-the-job expereince. Four characteristics of school districts make learning experientially difficult in educational administration. First, goals are unclear and hard to measure, making self-assessment troublesome. Second, participation in the organization is fluid, making interaction rates high and contact extensive. Third, the technology both in the technical core and at the managerial level is diffuse and uncodified, making intuition, rather than knowledge about means-ends chains, the primary method of decision making. Finally, the organization is loosely-coupled, making the articulation of goals and expectations between central office and the school problematic.

While these four characteristics of school districts make experiential

learning difficult and making sense of the role problematic, such learning may not be as impossible as March suggests. Experiential learning is on a continuum from impossible to extremely easy to accomplish. It seems reasonable to assume that the activities of principals, though complex, occur in some determinable pattern which, when discovered and understood, can lead to more competent management of schools. Appropriate training might be designed to assist principals in analyzing the characteristics and patterns of their work.

Conclusion

Before we can effectively select and train administrators we must make sense of the work they do. To this end, broad generalizations and heroic idealizations of the job are counterproductive. (See March, 1978). Instead, we have examined the more mundane properties of the tasks of principals to gain an understanding which might guide those who select and train principals.

In brief, the tasks of principals are characterized by brevity, variety, and fragmentation. These three properties in combination make the job hectic, complex, and hard to learn experientially. To conclude, I would suggest that further research into the work of principals and the development of a framework for analysis may provide the underpinnings necessary for designing more effective, more focused selection and training procedures.

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